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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ROME 000997

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/27/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [IT](#) [ITALIAN POLITICS](#)

SUBJECT: ITALY'S NORTHERN LEAGUE: THE CHALLENGE OF
DEVOLUTION AND BOSSI'S HEALTH

REF: A. ROME 0460

[B](#). 05 ROME 3816

[C](#). ROME 0725

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor David D. Pearce for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#). (C) SUMMARY: Italy's Northern League faces two strategic challenges in the short and the long term: what to do if the pro-devolution referendum fails this summer and how to replace the party's founder and unquestioned leader Umberto Bossi, who is still weak after a devastating stroke two years ago. An internal split between pragmatists and "true believers" will complicate the process. Interviews with eight party leaders and party observers revealed no consensus for the future of the "Lega" in Bossi's absence. END SUMMARY.

BOSSI IS THE LEGA'S UNCHALLENGED LEADER

[1](#)2. (C) Poloff asked a group of young Northern League (Lega) leaders in the northern Lega stronghold of Lombardy who could eventually replace party founder and leader Umberto Bossi (64), whose health remains weak after a devastating stroke two years ago. Daniele Belotti, Regional Counselor for the Lega and self-described "Legista at heart," said he is sure that Bossi would take care of that problem for the party and not leave them without a leader. Belotti, Europarliamentarian Matteo Salvini and Provincial Counselor Paolo Grimoldi then explained to Milan Acting Pol/Econ Chief, Poloff and Milan Pol FSN that a true "Leghista" sees the party and Umberto Bossi as one in the same. They described with reverence how he built the party from scratch and how he always knew where to guide the party. They refused to speculate about a Bossi successor.

[1](#)3. (C) The next day, Regional Council Delegation Leader for the Lega Massimo Zanello told Poloff that the issue of who succeeds Bossi is a real problem for the Lega. Zanello, who eschews wearing the Lega's trademark green tie or handkerchief, calls himself a Lega pragmatist and "not a true Leghista" in the eyes of those who call themselves Leghistas at heart. He told Poloff that Bossi remains the undisputed leader and symbol of the Lega. He also called Bossi a calculating pragmatist with undisputed moral authority among the Lega's emotional base. Zanello compared Bossi to former U.S. President Richard Nixon, saying that only Nixon among American political leaders had sufficient anti-communist credentials to open a pragmatic dialogue with China. In Zanello's view, only Bossi could have forged a deal with PM Berlusconi without being viewed as having sold out the party to the establishment. He continued that Bossi could even form an alliance with the center-left that would be acceptable to the base. Looking forward, Zanello said that Bossi's health is weak and that there are no emerging leaders who combine undisputed credibility with the base and pragmatism. He predicted the party would split among pragmatists and fundamentalists if Bossi's health fails completely.

[1](#)4. (C) Journalists Guido Passalacqua and Carlo Brambilla said that Bossi traditionally controlled every aspect of the Lega's direction and identity. Like Zanello and the young Lega leaders, they said there is no clear second in command even if Bossi had technically anointed Lega Secretary Giancarlo Giorgetti as his successor during the last party congress five years earlier. Both Passalacqua and Brambilla agreed that Giorgetti had not shown sufficient charisma to take over from Bossi. Lega Spokesperson Niccoletta Maggi told Poloff that Varese Provincial President Marco Reguzzoni was an upcoming leader and a recent edition of "Panorama" confirmed that. Ex-Minister of reform Roberto Calderoli is damaged goods as a result of the scandal involving his wearing t-shirts emblazoned with cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed (REF A). According to the two journalists, Minister of Labor Maroni is the brightest leader in the Lega, but they echoed comments by Zanello that Maroni has not worked to establish a strong base of support within the party. Both journalists agreed that Bossi's wife wields tremendous influence, especially now that Bossi spends more time at home, and they also said Bossi would like to see his son, Renzo, eventually take the realm.

[1](#)5. (C) Bossi's health is failing and he is losing touch with

the people, according to the journalists and Zanello. The journalists explained how Bossi fell asleep during a meeting with the Lega's inner circle to decide the party's candidate list for parliament. More telling, they said he failed to show at a party meeting the next day to formally approve the list, and no one felt comfortable enough to develop a rank-ordered list in Bossi's absence so they listed potential candidates alphabetically. Zanello said Bossi is losing contact with the people given his health limitations and is beginning to rely on a very reduced circle of advisers.

DEVOLUTION IS THE LEGA'S MAIN TARGET

16. (C) Without hesitation, Belotti told Poloff that the dream of every true Leghista is eventual secession from Italy. He described that as the final goal of a long process that begins with Devolution, a limited form of federalism up for referendum this summer (REF B). Lega adviser Germano Draghi told Poloff he thinks the Lega would leave the coalition with Berlusconi if the referendum fails, especially if it appears that Bossi's center-right allies only provided lukewarm support for the referendum. The two journalists said Bossi's desire to stay in the government means he would only leave the coalition if the center-right loses the April 9-10 elections and the devolution referendum fails.

17. (C) In an interview with "Panorama," Bossi hinted at his thinking on the issue. He said he is with Berlusconi because there is no chance for reform without him. For Bossi, reform means Devolution. He expressed confidence the center-right would win but noted the Lega would be free to do what it wants if the coalition loses in April. Bossi calls the referendum a first step toward "fiscal federalism." The journalists, Maggi and Zanello all agreed that Bossi would look for a way to stay in the coalition if the Lega is part of the government and the referendum fails. It remains very unclear whether the referendum will pass or not.

A NOTE ON LEGA POLICIES

18. (C) In September, Maggi told Poloff that the Lega has been "good and quiet for five years because they wanted Devolution." Though Bossi and the Lega have taken anti-immigration stances, positions against gay civil-unions and other conservative goals, the analysts agreed that Bossi has subordinated all other goals to achieving Devolution. Maggi said the Lega would "raise the tone" if the center-right loses, but that it would continue to be a loyal government ally as long as it sees that as the best path to Devolution.

19. (C) Draghi, who is one of two foreign policy advisers to the Lega, said the Lega is not interested in foreign policy. He noted that Bossi saw the Lega's popularity implode after his visit to Belgrade during the Kosovo bombings and that Bossi realized "foreign policy is beyond his area of expertise" and risks votes. Draghi continued that the Lega is a nationalist party of sorts and was not particularly sympathetic to Italian troop deployments in Iraq, but that he was willing support his coalition allies. He said the Lega's only foreign policy principle is the support of separatist movements, like the Basques and Catalans in Spain.

CALDEROLI'S T-SHIRT FLAP

10. (C) Opinions on Calderoli's t-shirt scandal were mixed. The two journalists said it had damaged Calderoli as a national figure but that many in the Lega base supported him. Most of Milan's pollsters (REF C) said it had had little affect on support for the Lega, even if one showed it had caused some supporters to migrate to Forza Italia. The scandal typifies the split inside the Lega between true believers and pragmatists. The true believers told Poloff that nobody had publicly criticized the point Calderoli was making about free speech and appeared supportive of Calderoli as they talked ominously about the "Muslimization of Europe." Zanello called Calderoli's actions ridiculous and irresponsible. In his "Panorama" interview, Bossi simply said he would not have done it himself.

UNITED AGAINST A NEW CENTER

11. (C) Several interlocutors noted Bossi's close relationship with Democrats of the Left (DS) President Massimo D'Alema, despite the obvious ideological differences. They said the Lega and DS had flirted previously with the idea of a coalition in Lombardy and did not preclude a future coalition. Many also said the DS and Lega have a common concern with the recreation of a new center party, which could exclude both of them from government.

COMMENT

112. (C) COMMENT: Bossi is the founder, heart and mind of the Lega. His poor health presents a classic succession problem. The Northern League will hold a party congress next November at which Bossi will indicate his successor, even if he will likely remain the party's true leader as long as his health permits. In any case, a clash between true believers and pragmatists seems inevitable in his absence. The outcome of Italy's April 9-10 elections will determine tactical alliances, but the Lega faces longer term challenges. END COMMENT.

113. (U) This cable was drafted jointly with AmConGen Milan.
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